

Már Jónsson, ed. 2021. *Galdur og guðlast á 17. öld: Dómar og bréf*. 2 vols. Reykjavík: Sögufélag. 946 pages. ISBN: 9789935466273.

Iceland, like the rest of Europe, underwent a period of witchcraft trials in the seventeenth century. Unlike better-known crazes, the majority of victims were male, and their spells were usually in written form. The Icelandic trials resemble those of England, rather than the continent, in being primarily trials for *maleficium*—harm to others, or to their property—resulting from accusations by the purported victims. While devils might be involved, satanic sabbaths were not. Presumably, these shared features reflect the absence of inquisitorial legal procedures in both countries. The Icelandic trials relied primarily, as means of proof, on oaths regarding the character and reputation of the accused—and sometimes of the accuser.

The legal documentation pertaining to Icelandic trials for sorcery is now available in a two-volume edition by Már Jónsson, *Galdur og guðlast á 17. öld: Dómar og bréf* [Magic and Blasphemy in the Seventeenth Century: Judgments and Documents], which cannot be praised too highly. This collection of primary sources includes the evidence for all accusations involving magical practice brought before a court, arranged chronologically, mainly from the *Alþingisbækur*, i.e., the historical records of the Alþingi, and the records of Þorleifur Kortsson (d. 1698), who held the administrative position of *lögmaður* for North and West Iceland from 1662 to 1679 and was *sýslumaður* for Strandasýsla and the northern part of Ísafjarðarsýsla from c. 1652 to 1670. That evidence is supplemented by information contained in letters (including registers of episcopal letters), annals, and even, on occasion, poetry. In addition to published sources, the author has examined the original manuscripts and presents alternative readings.

The entries for 133 trials are preceded by an introduction of just under 60 pages. This introduction includes a contextual discussion describing prosecutions for witchcraft in nearby lands, primarily Norway and Denmark, which were ruled, as was Iceland, by the Danish king. The history of Icelandic laws pertaining to magic is then summarized, as are examples of capital punishment. The introduction also contains entries in annals and other sources reporting supernatural phenomena, such as revenants, which are not witchcraft per se (although calling up revenants was one of the things witches were able to do). These items do not receive their own mention in the body of the work. Although the reader can hardly expect an entry for an anonymous Icelanders who, while in Denmark, had promised himself to the devil and

vanished when the devil took him in 1664 according to *Valholtsannáll* (1:36; cf. IA 1:365), it would have been nice to learn more about the *galdrablöð* [papers or parchment with magical spells or symbols] in the Westman Islands in 1721 (1:50; cf. IA 4:651). I note these examples for the benefit of those who are inclined to skip introductions; they would, however, be found by searching the Index of Terms for *galdrablöð* and *djöfull* [devil]. Also (understandably) omitted from the body of the work is the incest case of 1608 involving Þórdís Halldórsdóttir and Tómas Böðvarsson; a passing note in the case for the defence was the claim that Tómas was said to have seduced Þórdís with magic (1:24; AI 4:387–93; the author has treated this case in Jónsson 1993, 167).

Statistics are provided on pp. 41–42. Of the seventy-one individuals who came before judgment, 31% were executed, 49% received another punishment, and 20% were declared innocent. Six of the accused (8%) were women, one of whom was burned; of the 65 accused men, twenty-one (32%) were burned. These percentages are compared with those in the mainland Scandinavian countries.

Individual entries are in chronological order (with dates in the running header; this is the way I will refer to the cases below), except for the case of Margrét Þórðardóttir, which immediately follows that of her father (1654–55, 1656–62), and the report by Árni Magnússon and Páll Jónsson Vídalín from 1710, which is item 12 in one of the cases they reviewed, that of Ari Pálsson (1677–81). When individuals appear in more than one case, cross-references are provided. A brief introduction identifies the participants and stages of each case and lists the publications and/or manuscripts pertaining to it. Important scholarship pertaining to the case is cited. The documentation presented includes all official documents from local authorities, the Alþingi, and, occasionally, Copenhagen. Excerpts from letters pertaining to the cases by those involved, and even a poem by a relative, are included, as are annal entries, some of which are presented as sources in their own right, although others are merely mentioned in the introduction to the case. The texts themselves are presented, as is appropriate for this time period, in modern spelling but with inflections as found in the originals. Editorial principles are described on p. 58.

The four earliest cases (prior to the law of 1617) combine accusations of magic with other crimes, sexual misconduct or theft, which appear to be as important as (or more important than) the magic. It is of interest that two of them, one in *Barðastrandarsýsla* (1604–5) and one in *Húnavatnssýsla* (1609–12), turned against those making the accusation. In the first, the accuser was flogged; the second was unresolved for lack of a necessary oath, but the accuser would have been punished if found guilty. Of interest is the amount of the fines that would have been imposed for specific libels, if they had been proven. Two accusations of theft were rated at four marks each, as were separate accusations of believing in and dealing with the devil and being full of magic and witchcraft (1:72).¹ An accusation of being a liar, on the other hand, was worth only two

marks (1:72). The two accusations of magic reflect not only the traditional Icelandic terminology found, among other places, in medieval law codes, but also knowledge of more recent ideas about a heretical, devil-based sect that had developed during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and received its final and disastrous form, focusing on the satanic sabbath, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.² The idea of the satanic sabbath, and the resulting proliferation of accusations to which it led, does not appear to have been an issue in Icelandic courts.

The key document in the Icelandic witchcraft trials was the Danish law passed in 1617 but not translated into Icelandic until 1630. It is presented in Danish and in four Icelandic translations; the author notes that when the law was cited in specific trials, yet other translations were used.³ The importance of this law is that it specifies that, even if used for healing or other beneficial purposes, certain practices are magical and are prohibited in the Bible. Some of the practices involved misuse of God's word, i.e., quotations from the Bible. Punishment of an individual who knew and used such means depended on social status: the nobility were punished according to the decision of the king and his council, while non-nobles were to lose their property and be exiled. Those who dealt with such magicians but did not themselves perform magic must, for a first offence, undergo public absolution and pay a fine according to their means; for a second offence the punishment was the same as if they had done the magic themselves. There was, however, a second class of "true magicians" (*trolldfolk*; Icel. *galdramenn* in all translations) who had bound themselves to the devil or had dealings with him; they were to be treated "efter loven og recessen" [according to the law and the recess] (1:79),⁴ while those who dealt with them should lose their lives without possibility of clemency. The reference to the law and the recess must have specified the precise form of capital punishment imposed; it is clear that no one who had direct or indirect dealings with the devil was to live. Finally, all officials, including the clergy, were enjoined to report any such activity, on pain of themselves being considered sympathisers with magicians if they did not.

Although the law had not been formally presented in Iceland, Icelanders were aware of what went on overseas. The first burning for sorcery in Iceland occurred in 1625, and here the editor is forced to abandon the requirement of a court record, because none survive for this case. The only two contemporary sources are *Skarðsárannáll*, an annal composed by Björn Jónsson of Skarðsá (1574–1655), and an autobiographical poem by the brother of the victim, the poet Þorvaldur Rögnvaldsson, which maintains his innocence. The entry in Björn's *Skarðsárannáll* for 1625 informs us that: "Jón Rögnvaldsson from Svarfaðardalur was burned to death in Eyjafjörður after judgement for performing magic. He had woken up a dead person, who attacked a boy at Urðir,

killed horses there, and did other mischief" (1:89).⁵ The accusation will be recognized by Icelandic folklorists: it is an early account of a *sending*.

The third source given for this case was written about two centuries after the event by Jón Espólin (1769–1836), who considered it the beginning of the *Brennuöld* [Age of Burning], as he named the period of witchcraft trials (Espólin 1821–55, 6:27–28). It is unclear what his sources were for his additional material. He notes that Jón's brother was a *kraftaskáld*, a poet whose poetry could bring about evil, and that papers with mysterious signs were found in Jón's possession. Another Jón, a magician of evil reputation, is said to have tricked Jón Rögnvaldsson into his misdeeds. The *sýslumaður*, Magnús Björnsson of Munkaþverá, is given the responsibility for arresting and burning Jón Rögnvaldsson (1:90–91). One wonders how much of this material is accurate, and how much was added in the course of transmission.

Most of the cases were, as noted above, for *maleficium*: sickness or damage to a person, animal, or property. When means are mentioned, they are usually written spells or symbols. Although individuals may confess to dealings with the devil or his minions, there are no surviving written pacts like those from late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Sweden (cf. Olli 2004). The last capital condemnation for sorcery in Iceland was that of Klemus Bjarnason (1689–1691). His case was sent to Denmark, where the death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment and where Klemus soon died.

The bibliography contains a list of manuscripts used; a useful list of annals, with their dates and authors; and printed works and online sources. There are three indices: of personal names (including the status of the individual and any known dates), place names, and concepts (*atriðisorð*). The last includes specific magic-related terminology (i.e., *fjölkyngi*, *fordæða*, *galdur*, *galdrablöð*, *gjörningar*, *kukl*, *trölldómur*, *galdrastafir* (including *characteres*), *rúnir*, *særingar*, and *vers*), legal terms (*eiðvætti*, *lýrittareiður*), causes of accusation (*veikindi*, *vitfíring*), punishments (*brenna*, *hyðing*, *sekt*), and phenomena such as revenants (*draugar*). Terms are cross-referenced, though *djöfullinn* [the devil] and *óhrein andi* [unclean spirit] have separate entries. These indices are a valuable resource for those interested in the history of magic, as well as its prosecution.

Accusations often involved written or drawn texts containing *characteres*, often on *eikarspjöld* (wooden tablets).⁶ *Characteres* (the term is always treated grammatically as Latin; for illustrations see 1:424) are magical symbols well-known to those who frequent Icelandic tourist shops, where jewelry depicting some of them can be purchased. There is nothing specifically Icelandic about them; they are referred to in European magical texts (and, critically, in medical texts) at least as early as the second century CE. A list of 80 spells contained in a grimoire confiscated at the episcopal school at Skálholt in 1664 included *Ægishjálmur*, Solomon's Seal, The Lord's Seal, the Sator Arepo square, and invocations of Þórr and Óðinn (1:329–32). The bishop reported the discovery of

this booklet to the authorities, but the boys involved never came to trial, having fled the country. One eventually returned and became a *lögréttumaður*.

The contents of the volumes reflect the thoroughness and precision one expects from Már Jónsson. The following comments are not in any way meant as criticism; rather, it is hoped that they will aid the reader approaching a very rich, if dense, work, and perhaps anticipate a few questions such a reader may have.

The reader is expected to have prior knowledge of Icelandic (and, to some extent, Danish) officialdom and legal procedures. Although various cases quote the Icelandic legal code, *Jónsbók*, in more or less detail, the clearest exposition of the way a case was supposed to be tried is found in documents describing cases in which the correct procedures were not followed, namely those taken up by Árni Magnússon and Páll Jónsson Vídalín. The case of Ari Pálsson (1677–81) is followed by their report on it, based on an examination of its documentation, from 1710 (2:100–119).

The least familiar of such procedures is the use of oaths as a form of evidence. Oaths as to whether the defendant was telling the truth had to be delivered by individuals of the same sex and status (layman or priest) as the accused and were offered by more or fewer individuals depending on how seriously the accusation was taken; in some cases the accused could choose his own witnesses (*fangavottir*), and indeed some individuals pre-empted rumor by demanding to clear themselves before an actual accusation was made. If an accusation was taken seriously, the witnesses were chosen from among neighbours or (in the case of priests) the clergy. It could be hard to find individuals who were not related to accuser or accused, and those swearing might not be willing to accept the precise wording of the oath set before them, for example if an individual was a “known” magician but they did not believe he was responsible for the specific harm of which he was accused.

There is no discussion of what blasphemy meant in the seventeenth century, or whether it was considered to be implicit in the concept of magic. Those interested in the topic will find examples in the index of concepts under *guðlast/guðlöstun* [blasphemy], *vanbrúkun guðs orða og nafns* [misuse of the words and name of God], and similar terms, which are often explicitly mentioned in accusations concerning magic.

While annals published in *Annálar 1400–1800* are frequently referred to, their treatment is not consistent. There are regular references to them in both the introduction to the volume and the introductions to individual cases; sometimes they are presented as sources in their own right. Annal entries tend to be quite brief, and their contents may reflect fact, rumor, or use of another manuscript. While the evidence of annals written in the vicinity at the time of a trial may be useful, such are not always available. As Már Jónsson points out in the case of Ari Pálsson (1677–81), the annalist farthest from the events in time

and space writes most, claiming that the victim was a *hreppstjóri* with a taste for fancy clothes (AI 4:308). However, the individual in question was never a *hreppstjóri*, and the comment on his clothing (which many are said to have purchased after his death) is not likely to be more accurate (2:79). Sometimes, two copies of a single annal—even by the same scribe—can contain different information, as in the case of Helga Höskuldsdóttir (1682–83) and two manuscripts of the same annal copied by a *sýslumaður* (2:229–30; see also 2:240–41). There are other examples where the documents of the Alþingi differ considerably from the brief annal notes. Clearly, the passage of time, as well as distance in space, can produce new “cultural memory,” as in the case of Jón Rögnvaldsson. When compared to the contemporary documents, the summary of the case of Páll Oddsson in Húnavatnssýsla (1672–74) by Jón Ólafsson from Grunnavík (1705–1779) shows clear folkloric accretions (2:29). Such accounts by eighteenth-century authors, including Jón Espólin (above), should be used with caution. Perhaps the most striking example of disagreement between an annal and the official document is the case of Sigurður Jónsson (1671). The judgment of the Alþingi was that since he had confessed freely and without coercion to various forms of magic and blasphemy, including invocation of the devil, he was to be burned. *Eyrarannáll* informs us that he was burned for causing a woman’s sickness by magic. Perhaps an accusation of causing sickness was the reason his case came to the Alþingi in the first place, but we should beware of simply weaving together the sources we have without examining each one carefully. This example is, however, extremely valuable as an indication of the different reasons why ordinary people and the authorities were concerned about magic.

Even (perhaps, especially) when dealing with annals, as was pointed out in the case of Ari Pálsson, more information is not necessarily more accurate information. The best example of this, and the only case in which the author has (presumably because it is outside of his time-period and unsupported by legal evidence) given us material that is demonstrably wrong, is the annal entry describing what would seem to be the first witchcraft trial in Iceland, that of a nun at the convent of Kirkjubær in 1343. Here, the longest annal entry has been printed, that found in *Flateyjarbók* (GKS 1005 fol.), which was compiled between 1387 and 1394. The entry reads: “Brend sistir ein i Kirkjubæ er Kristin het er gefiz hafdi pukanum med brefi. hon hafdi ok misfarit med guds likama ok kastad aftr vm nædahustre. lægiz med morgum leikmonnum” [A nun called Kristin at Kirkjubær was burned. She had given herself to the devil in a document. She had also mistreated the host and thrown it down the latrine and slept with many laymen] (Unger and Vigfússon 1868, 3:560). However, *Lögmansannáll*, written by Einar Hafliðason (1307–1393), a priest and eventually official at Hólar, who was alive at the time of the event and to whom the details would have been known, tells a different story. In the year 1343, *Lögmansannáll* records, among other things, the arrival of the newly consecrated bishop Jón Sigurðsson at Skálholt and

his punishment of two monks in Þykkvabær for beating their abbot. At nearby Kirkjubær convent, Bishop Sigurðr degraded a nun from her religious status for blasphemy against (or cursing) the pope, and then she was burned (Storm 1888, 274; “Jtem degraderade hann systur j Kirkjubæ vm pava blasphemiam. ok sidan var hon brend”). The word *blasphemiam* is in Latin and declined accordingly; the detail about degrading the anonymous nun from her ecclesiastical status indicates knowledge of the rule according to which church courts handed over condemned criminals to secular authorities for capital punishment. At this time, elsewhere in Europe burning was usually the punishment for heresy or treason—we can only speculate what the nun had said about the pope, or the papal office, that merited such a death.⁷ Perhaps the very nature of her misdeed made the punishment seem overly severe, and addition of the stories about mistreatment of the host, a written compact with the devil, and a reputation for sleeping with laymen were eventually used to justify it.⁸

It is important to note that although the idea of a written compact with the devil was known in medieval religious writing (where it is assigned to men; the story of Theophilus was well known in Iceland from the miracles of the Virgin Mary), at this time it had not penetrated the legal system in any European country.⁹ In the fourteenth century the argument that witchcraft was a form of heresy was still in the process of formation; of interest in this context is that throwing the host into the latrine was one of the blasphemous acts attributed to heretics by Gregory IX in 1233 (Barber 1978, 180). When, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, men and women were regularly accused of being devil worshippers, their compacts were said to be sealed with sex or an obscene kiss, not written documents. Written compacts are known from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Sweden (cf. Olli 2004), but by this time literacy was relatively common. It should be added that it is not only the story of the nun that has grown in Flateyjarbók: in addition to beating their abbot, the monks were said to have been punished for fornication and fathering children. In short, we are safe in following the contemporary account of *Lögmannsannáll* for the nun of Kirkjubær. While she may have been the first Icelander burned at the stake, the first conviction for *maleficium* in Iceland remains that of the priest Þorleifur Björnsson, for adultery and magic in 1546, while the first burning for sorcery was that was that of Jón Rögnvaldsson in 1625. Már Jónsson is to be congratulated on producing an invaluable source collection that will be an essential resource for students of magic, religion, legal procedure, and the seventeenth century.

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NOTES

1. The former claim was that “hann tryði á fjándann og hann hafði alla sína höndlan hjá honum,” while the latter was that a person was “fullur með göldrum og gjörninga [sic].”
2. For the history of the factors culminating in those beliefs, see Cohn.
3. It should be noted that here the numbering of the Icelandic translations contains a duplication: there are two sections labelled ‘2’ (2:79, 81).
4. Vogt defines a recess as “a type of law promulgated by the king and the Council of the Realm together” (2014, 81).
5. Translations here and elsewhere are my own, unless otherwise noted.
6. Although etymologically the first element means ‘oak,’ by the early modern period it was used for wood more generally. I thank Katelin Parsons for this information.
7. Pope John XXII held views concerning the Beatific vision that were at one point considered controversial, and he was also very hard on some religious orders. He died the year before Bishop Jón Sigurðsson came to Iceland, and a new pope was elected in 1342.
8. Interestingly, Flateyjarbók is generally believed to have made use of *Lögmannsannáll*.
9. The first reference I have been able to find of an accusation, in court, of a written compact with Satan is the case of Guillaume Adeline, a doctor of theology and former professor at Paris, in 1453. The accusation was that he had bound himself to Satan to preach against the reality of the [satanic] sabbath. In addition to the purported written compact, he had done homage to a demon by kissing him under his tail in the traditional way (Cohn 1976, 230).

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